

Calling all Antipodean pharmacists: your one-year countdown has begun

Reciprocal registration arrangements between Britain, Australian and New Zealand will end next year. Dawn Connelly finds out how things will change

If pharmacists registered in Australia or New Zealand are planning a working holiday in Britain, they had better move quickly: their one-year countdown has begun.

From 30 June 2006, reciprocal arrangements for mutual recognition between the Royal Pharmaceutical Society and the registration authorities in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa will end. Last year, 293 Australian and New Zealand pharmacists registered with the Society via the reciprocal arrangements. How will the registration process for these pharmacists change, what impact might it have on the pharmacy workforce in London and will Australia and New Zealand follow suit and reduce access to UK pharmacists?

Currently, pharmacists registered in Australia and New Zealand, provided they supply the relevant paperwork and registration fee (£110), can register with the Society after completing four weeks of supervised practice and attending a reciprocity meeting at the Society's headquarters in London.

The Society also honours a former agreement with South Africa, but only for pharmacists who registered before 31 March 1968, when that agreement ended.

In October 2003, the Society decided to end reciprocal arrangements with these countries on the recommendation of its Adjudicating Committee. The committee suggested that the Society could be challenged in the courts on the grounds that it discriminates against other overseas pharmacists, who must pass the Society's registration examination as part of their registration process.

Under the new arrangements all overseas applicants, except those from Northern Ireland and the European Economic Area, will be considered by the Adjudicating Committee. This means that from July 2006 Australian and New Zealand applicants wishing to register in Britain will have to undertake an assessment programme currently provided by Aston, Brighton or Sunderland universities, complete preregistration training and pass the Society's registration examination (see Panel). This process will take two years and could cost more than £8,500 in fees. In addition, the popular route of obtaining a two-year working holiday visa (available to Australian and New Zealand citizens under 31 years old) will no longer be viable.

London workforce

Many pharmacists from Australia and New Zealand who choose to spend a working holiday in the UK seek employment as locums in London hospitals. Reed Health Group is a recruitment company that manages all locum staff bookings for the 18 NHS primary care trusts and acute trusts in the North West London Strategic Health Authority. Alan Howard, business development and contracts director at Reed Health, told *The Journal*: "Since 2002 our offices in Australia and New Zealand have placed large numbers of pharmacists and technicians in the UK. The majority choose temporary NHS positions initially, but they often ask for our support to help them extend their visas and take up substantive positions."

He explains that recruitment trends clearly indicate that it is common for pharmacies across London to rely on locums to comple-



Time is running out for Antipodeans planning a working holiday in the UK

ment their substantive staff teams: "We know that chief pharmacists are concerned about the implications of [ending of reciprocal arrangements] for their service provision in 2006, and we are working closely with them to assess what we can do to help. By doing so early on we hope to address what could become a difficult recruitment issue."

Tony West, president of the Guild of Healthcare Pharmacists and chief pharmacist at Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust, told *The Journal* that around 5 to 10 per cent of pharmacists working at Guy's and St Thomas' at any given time are Antipodean. He believes that it is hard to predict how ending the reciprocal arrangements will affect the London locum market. "It has been bad over the past few years but we will have to wait and see whether the opening of these new schools will improve the market significantly."

He says that a lot of Australians and New Zealanders are coming to the UK now to complete their training before the arrangements end. "It may be that we don't see an instantaneous impact," he says, explaining that by the time these pharmacists return home the new schools will be producing graduates. He adds that the expansion of the EU and the new directive on recognition of professional qualifications may also affect the market.

Mr West admits that he has mixed views about the ending of reciprocal arrangements.

Registration in the UK via the Society's Adjudicating Committee

Applicants must have completed a pharmacy course that is comparable to those in the UK and must be registered, or eligible to register, as a pharmacist overseas. After preliminary consideration of relevant documentation, the committee will decide on two possible routes. Applicants may be asked to complete the standard requirements as follows:

- To undertake the overseas pharmacists' assessment programme (one year)
- To complete 12 months of preregistration training
- To pass the Royal Pharmaceutical Society's registration examination

Alternatively, a formal interview with the committee may be required. Following this, applicants may be instructed to complete a four-year UK pharmacy degree course, 12 months of preregistration training and the registration examination or the standard requirements (as above).

The application fee is £556 (this is non-refundable). The interview fee is an additional £556. The overseas pharmacist assessment programme is approximately £7,500 and the Society's registration fee is £125.

"I fully understand why the Society has had little option, but it would have been nice to give it a bit longer." He adds: "The sad thing is the loss of opportunity [for pharmacists from Australia and New Zealand] to work in another health care system."

Opportunities for UK pharmacists

The Australian and New Zealand professional bodies are currently considering their reciprocal arrangements but have not indicated that they will end the possibility of UK pharmacists working in their countries.

Australia, via the Council of Pharmacy Registering Authorities and its counterpart body the Australian Pharmacy Examining Council, is currently developing a modified procedure, which is expected to come into effect once the UK ends reciprocal arrangements. The new process for registration will be open to pharmacists in any country where the educational and preregistration training requirements are of a quality that is assured to levels at least equivalent to those in Australia. Guy Kretschmer, executive officer, COPRA, says: "We anticipate that the UK and Ireland will be countries that meet [the standards] but it will be broader and therefore it is an equitable arrangement."

He adds that there will be a competency examination that will have to be satisfied and will be run overseas. He anticipates that this will build upon the examination that is cur-

Registration in Australia or New Zealand for UK pharmacists

UK pharmacists wishing to practise in Australia or New Zealand can do so provided they meet certain requirements. These requirements are likely to change next year (see text). However, currently, the requirements are that applicants must have a pharmacy degree gained in Britain from a university accredited by the Royal Pharmaceutical Society and be registered with the Royal Pharmaceutical Society or the Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland. To practise in Australia, they must also have completed one year of post-registration experience in Britain.

All applicants must request a letter of identity and good standing from their regulatory body, which is then valid for six months from the date of its issue. This certificate is issued directly to the relevant body in Australia or New Zealand. Registration requirements in Australia vary between the states and territories. New Zealand and most of the Australian states and territories require applicants to complete a minimum of four weeks of supervised practice in a community or hospital pharmacy. In addition; New Zealand and some Australian states or territories require an interview or assessment to be completed.

Details of the specific requirements in each state and territory of Australia are available on the Society's website (www.rpsgb.org.uk).

rently used in Australia to assess preregistrants, but with the need for local knowledge of Australia removed.

Dr Kretschmer predicts that, on arrival in Australia, pharmacists are likely to have to undertake at least four weeks of supervised practice and a further national forensic examination, which will probably consist of multiple choice questions, before they are eligible to register.

Bronwyn Clark, general manager and registrar of the Pharmacy Council of New Zealand, says that the registration pathway for UK pharmacists in New Zealand is likely to

initially stay the same. However, she adds that, like Australia, the council is considering introducing an additional screening examination in order to assess the current clinical competence of UK and Irish pharmacists. "If the council decides to introduce this examination it would be made available in the country of origin at regular times of the year," she explains. The council will make a decision later this year.

So, indications are that UK pharmacists will continue to have the chance to experience other health care systems during a working holiday in Australia or New Zealand.

Correction

The Royal Pharmaceutical Society's new member registration fee is £125, not £110.